



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

DECISION NOTICE NINEPIPE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN

July 28, 2015

Description of the Proposed Action

Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is managed to conserve and enhance habitats that emphasize pheasants and waterfowl, while also benefiting a variety of nongame wildlife, and to promote public hunting and other compatible wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

To address these goals, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) prepared a management plan for Ninepipe WMA that provides guidance for our wildlife biologists, WMA Manager, and Regional Wildlife Manager. It also will assist regional staff with establishing annual work plans for the WMA.

MFWP proposes to accept the Draft Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area Management Plan as Final.

Public Involvement

MFWP worked with many collaborators to create the Draft Ninepipe WMA Management Plan. Collaborators included Montana Pheasants Forever, Mission Valley Pheasants Forever, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Natural Resources and Conservation Service. The draft underwent multiple reviews by collaborators as well as internal specialists with MFWP. Prior to release for public comment, the document was sent to the Flathead Reservation Fish and Wildlife Board for their review and was later approved at a board meeting. The Draft Ninepipe WMA Management Plan was released for a 30-day public comment period on April 22, 2015.

Summary of Public Comments

MFWP received 7 comments for the Ninepipe WMA Management Plan. The comments were generally positive in nature. One comment did not pertain to the management plan, but pertained to the Ninepipe and Pablo Reservoirs that are not managed by MFWP. Comments focused on land management practices, predator control, recreation (wildlife-viewing), and low pheasant numbers. One of these comments also pointed out an error in our calculation on pages 14-15 regarding the number of wetland basins. We corrected the sentence for our final document.

MFWP Responses to Public Comments

- 1. Wetland-related comment.** One individual commented that this was a good plan if management of wetlands was based on environmental indicators and recommended not

falling into a specific schedule when drawing down wetlands. "Manage ponds for shorebirds."

MFWP response: "When managing wetlands, FWP considers wildlife-related opportunities that range from hunting to bird watching" (page 13). Wetland management is a high priority for MFWP, and we recognize the need to manage wetlands based on environmental indicators. On page 16 of the Management Plan under the Wetland Habitat Management Objectives, MFWP describes in greater detail that "periodic drying allows oxygen filtration, organic matter decomposition, and nutrient cycling, which promotes diverse and productive vegetation and an abundance of invertebrates." On page 17 of the Management Plan the first bullet indicates that, over time, periodic wetland draw-downs will occur subject to weather conditions, and over time the draw-downs will be adapted based on vegetation response. Draw-downs are recommended through the Management Plan for specific tracts with the intention of restoring and maintaining wetland productivity, all of which are subject to weather conditions.

On page 83 of the Management Plan we address management for shorebirds. "Manage water levels, where applicable and with appropriate timing, to create mudflats and very shallow water for migrating and nesting shorebirds and waterbirds."

2. **Land management related comments.** "Other tools such as burning, mowing, and grazing may also help achieve habitat objectives." "Increase proposed rate of grassland management..." "...(P)roviding more cover for these birds will allow them to recover."

MFWP response: MFWP acknowledges the use of the above as effective tools and references their use throughout the management plan. On pages 17-20 we discuss burning, grazing, and mowing, and how those tools may be used in the future. Page 18 of the plan states, "The food value of new growth and the flush of invertebrates after haying and irrigating grasslands attract and support a wide array of game and nongame wildlife." Annual harvest of hay within the larger wetland basins on the Ringneck Ranch and Davis Tracts, and then flooding these sites as soon as possible thereafter, attract potentially the highest number and greatest diversity of birds anywhere on the WMA. It has been this practice that put our WMA on the map for shorebird watching in just a year or two after it started. Canada goose hunting in these basins has also been as good as anywhere on the WMA since managing them via hay harvesting. In addition, to benefit nongame species, we list on page 83 an objective that, where and when appropriate, we will coordinate land management activities such as burning and grazing.

MFWP is actively managing about 5% of the total managed grassland. "Complete renovation of nesting cover can be a costly and time consuming endeavor and is required at some point in time (preferably within 10 to 20 years) to maintain long-term productivity." Establishment/Renovation objectives in the Management Plan are designed to allow for greater flexibility in creating new cover based on prioritization.

3. **Predator comments.** "... (S)ome predator control may be needed." "I believe an effort should be made to reduce the predator impact on the pheasant population..."

MFWP response: Some skunk removal was conducted as part of a research project. For that project we conducted an environmental assessment. All other predator control for the Ninepipe WMA is managed by the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes.

4. **Work plan comments.** One comment was submitted that focused on the WMA goal – specifically, annual work plans. “We are advocates of annual work plans...cannot stress enough how important this one sentence is to our organization and its members.”

MFWP response: MFWP stands by their goal and will use the Management Plan to assist MFWP staff with creating annual work plans that will guide the management of Ninepipe WMA and will be approved by the Regional Wildlife Manager. Annual work plans will be completed by no later than May 15 each year.

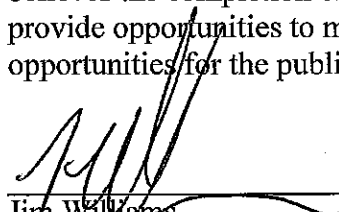
5. **Recreation/Wildlife viewing comments.** Two comments expressed concern regarding safer areas to park and view wildlife. One of these comments also suggested making all areas wheel chair accessible, adding toilets, and enhancing the viewing experience with platforms or blinds.

MFWP response: MFWP strongly supports every opportunity for wildlife viewing. Creating new parking areas and adding toilets and ADA-accessible areas require additional funding that is not currently available within MFWP. However, working with partners, we recognize that any project is possible and have identified two potential sites that would work for more accessible wildlife viewing. One site is the current parking area on the corner of Ninepipe Lane and Logan Road. The other site is the steel barn area off of Logan Road on our Ringneck Ranch Tract.

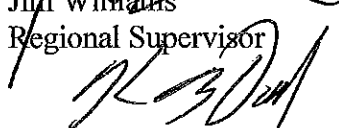
MFWP FINAL DECISION

In reviewing all the public comments and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I hereby approve the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area Management Plan as final.

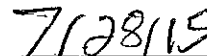
Through the public review process described above, MFWP found no significant impacts associated with the Draft Management Plan. Noting and including the responses to public comments, the Draft Management Plan will become the Final Management Plan. MFWP believes the completion of this plan is in the best interests of protecting wetlands. It will also provide opportunities to manage and improve habitat for wildlife, and it will provide recreational opportunities for the public.



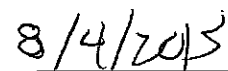
Jim Williams
Regional Supervisor



Ken McDonald
Wildlife Division Administrator



Date



Date